



KEA'S ARK OF NEWARK

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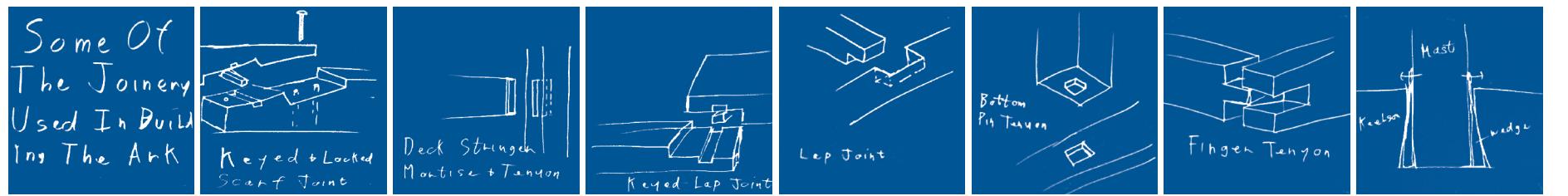
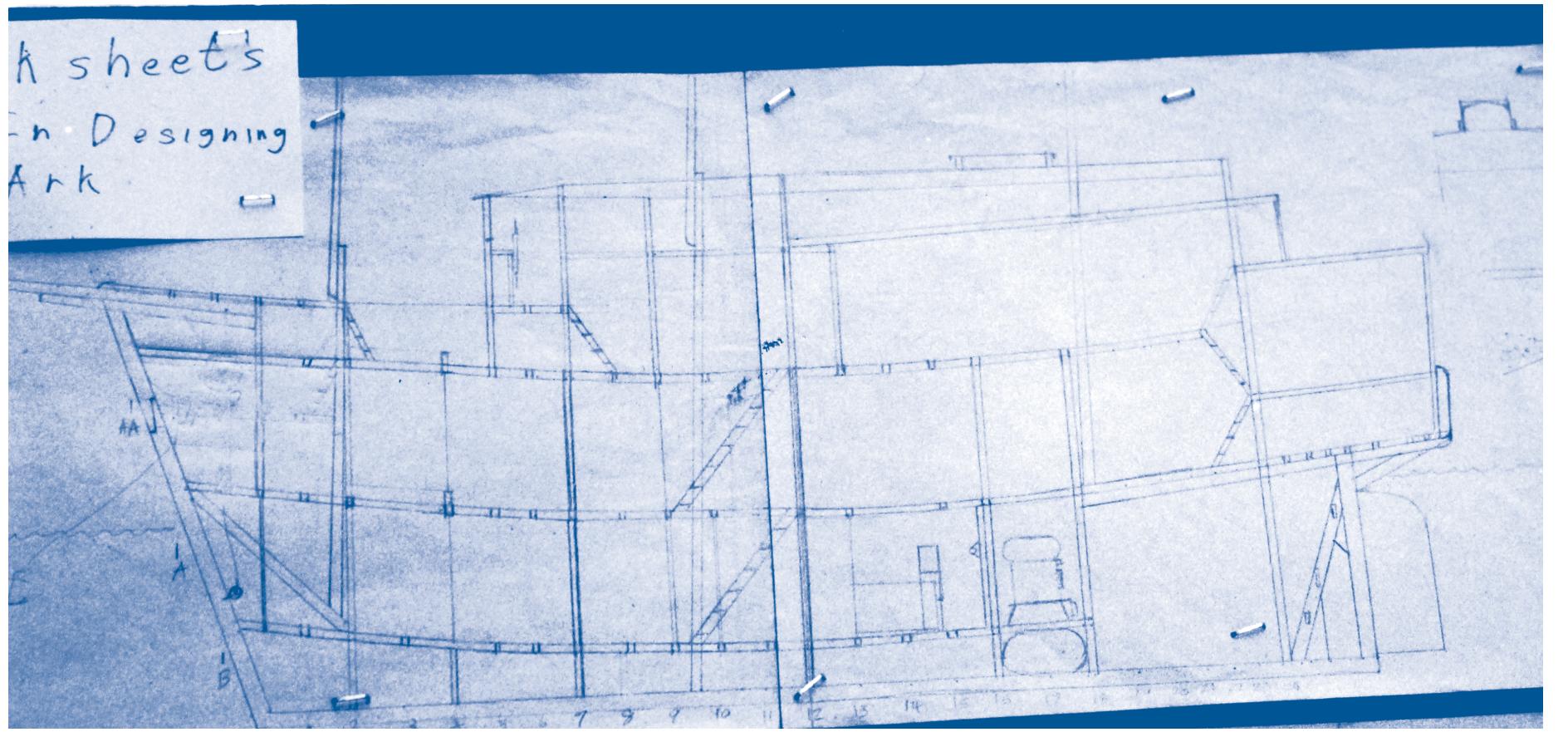
IN LARGE PART, and especially at the beginning, it was a boat, meant to do what boats do. That's how the builder talked about it. When asked about her background, she most often told a story in varying detail about an American father working in Japan when the war broke out. He had married a Japanese woman named Tawana, and they had three children. After the mother and the youngest child were killed in the Doolittle raids over Tokyo, Kea, her brother, and father took a boat across the ocean to California. When a typhoon hit, the frightened girl vowed "I would become a ship's master, never again its cargo."

Other, perhaps firmer, evidence points to a childhood spent on and around a Hopi reservation in northern Arizona. But the rocky mesas of northern Arizona do not as satisfactorily account for Kea's later fascination with and commitment to ark-building and her Melvillean sense that, when all goes wrong, one properly heads out to sea.

Whether they began across the Pacific or only the continent, Kea Tawana's wanderings eventually brought her to Newark. She may have arrived, traumas in tow, as early as the mid-1950s. But she seems to have moved around the area a bit before settling down in Newark around 1966, constructing a house on a truck bed so that she might remain mobile. She eventually parked it in an empty lot on Camden Street. But home seemed always beyond her grasp.

Late on August 8, 1982, Kea opened a logbook and wrote about her first day building an ark. She recorded its location in degrees and minutes, then: "No seas, weather fair, the keel was laid on the ways at 11:30 hours by myself." She later told a reporter that the ark's maiden voyage would be back to Japan, to visit her mother's grave and tell her that her daughter had turned out worthwhile. At other times, she expressed a general longing to sail away and live in peace on the seas, a sense that life on land had grown too tough – too belligerent, polluted, and corrupt.

She continued to build on her own for several years. And as she accumulated materials, joined them, and the ark grew, so did its meanings. And as people took notice on the way to work or school or looking out their back window or front door, the meanings accumulated and the ark expanded from boat to icon, from structure to symbol. It was, as one critic wrote, a sort of "inadvertent art." And around something built to flee the city condensed a drama that became integral to Newark's late twentieth-century story.



Kea built a very visible ark out of a city that was disappearing. The older Newark of wood-frame single homes, century-old school buildings, and bustling industrial plants was coming down, and she was a recycler, working demolition jobs cheap, since she wanted the material more than the money, and otherwise picking over the city's abandoned and crumbling infrastructure. She carried it all back to Camden Street on a baby carriage, a handcart, or her back, which had, she said, "a working load of 400 pounds." As the hull took shape out of the sturdy timbers of Newark's more affluent years, paving stones served as its ballast. Iron from fire escapes and fencing bound it together. Salvaged pipes, sinks, and toilets would form a plumbing system, while the transformer from an old elevator shaft, connected to a gas generator, would provide electricity. Glass from churches and banks would become porthole windows. A clothesline pole served as bowsprit, and the ark flew a 48-star flag set in an old school. Kea continued assembling and joining, and within five years the ark had grown to almost thirty feet high, twenty feet wide, and eighty-six feet long. Estimates ran from 80 to 125 tons.

This astonishing boat, rising on an empty lot in the Central Ward, at least two miles from any water, was at once, in its gathered components, the literal embodiment of so much city history and a ready-made metaphor for the grit and determination of the residents of a neighborhood that less than two decades before had been the epicenter of a racial uprising and brutal suppression and that, like so many other inner-city neighborhoods, had suffered the flight of population and capital that predated and quickened after that cataclysm. Like Kea herself, it was a reminder of the marginality of life in the Central Ward, the devaluing and destruction not only of the physical landscape, but also of the lives lived among it.

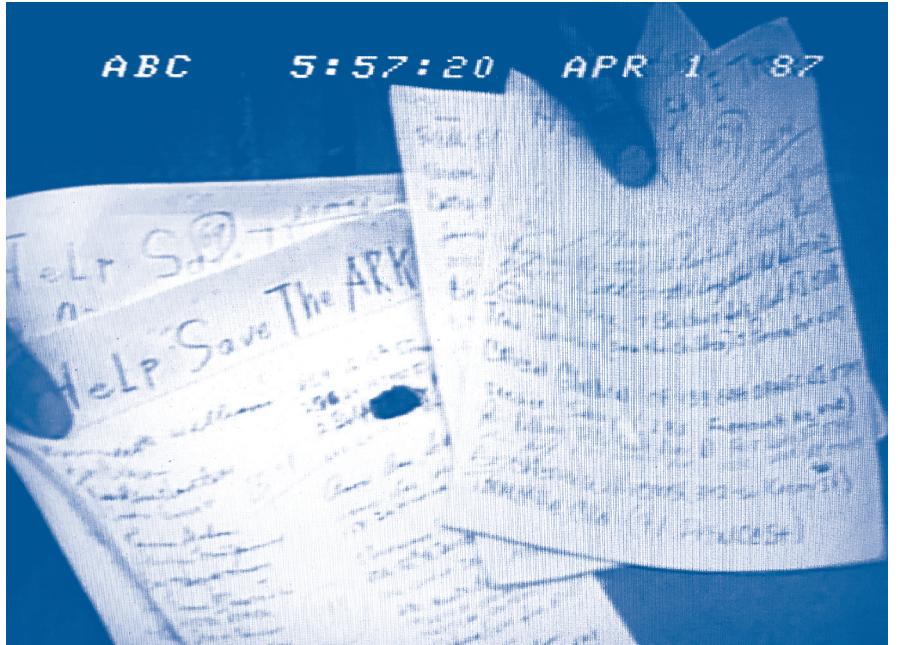


Others calculated the ark's value differently: Kea herself and a crowd of supporters both local and national prized its – how else to say this? – endearing weirdness. It belonged, as one of its staunchest supporters wrote, "to the realm of dreams and play." It made anything seem possible.

There was, however, much value in the land it sat on and in the construction (much-needed housing, especially) that could replace it. Whether it was a false choice between its artistic value to the community, on the one hand, and its purported negative exchange value to developers, on the other, was hotly contested. But that contest was not waged between equals. Mayor James met with Kea that July, and she agreed to finish and move the ark by the end of the year.

Kea failed to do either, and the ensuing legal battle brought the ark new attention. Area residents continued to hail Kea and her efforts as they traveled past the ark. Many stopped and visited. Teachers brought students to see it. Newspapers around the country and the world ran features on what some called "Newark's New Ark." Well-known artists and arts institutions rallied to its defense with letters of support, petitions, and a Concert for a Dying Ark. They most often pitched the ark as a folk art masterpiece, comparable to Simon Rodia's Watts Towers. A vocal, but out-matched, minority of the city council agreed.

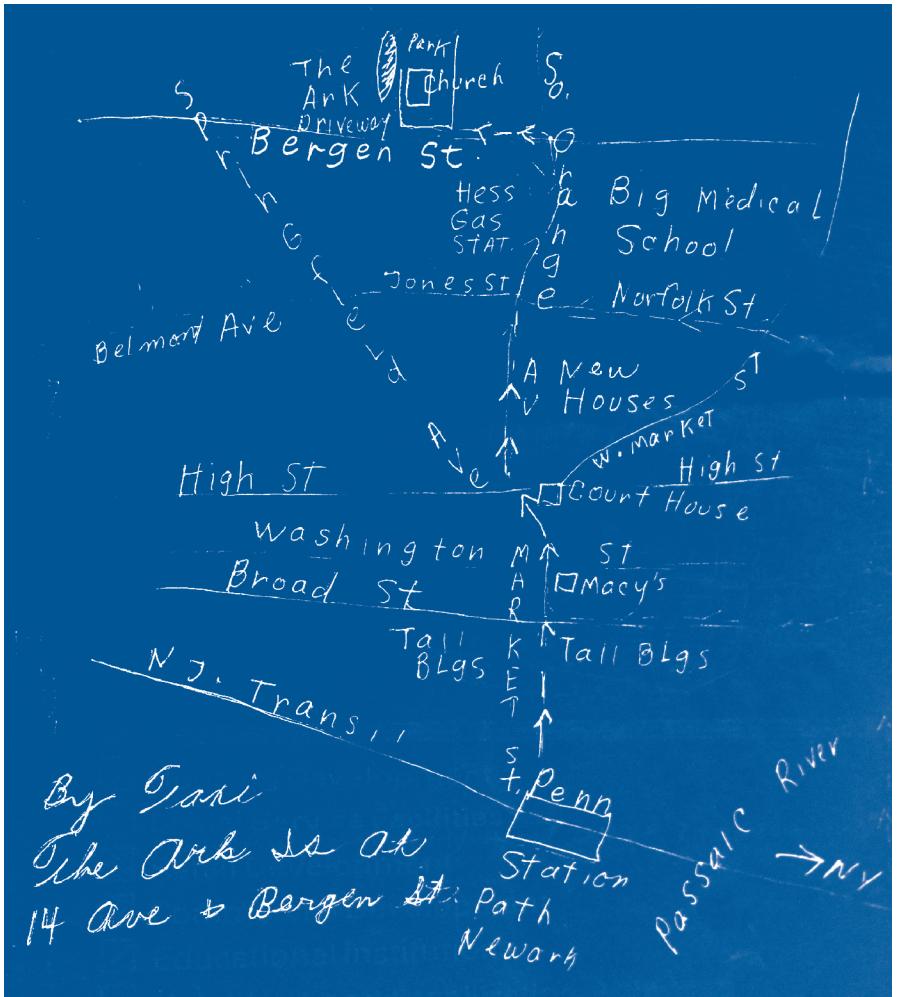
The James administration, however, threw a dizzying array of charges against Kea and her creation. Officials claimed it was a danger to visitors and local residents. They claimed that shipbuilding on Camden Street was a violation of zoning ordinances. And ultimately they threatened Humanity Baptist's tax-exempt status, arguing that its property now contained a structure being used for non-religious purposes. Two things drove the hostility toward the ark: a belief, shared by the James administration and New Community, that the ark hindered neighborhood development, and the young administration's desire to take control of the city and to enforce laws that had been flouted for years. Defeating the ark would be prime evidence that "a Sharpe change" had come to Newark.



But through the summer and fall of 1987, Kea's lawyer continued the fight and eventually secured an agreement that the city would not destroy the ark if it could be moved the following spring. Kea began dismantling the upper decks, so that the ark might fit under city power lines on its way out to Newark Bay. She said she planned to sail up to the Great Lakes and resettle there. But by early March 1988, she felt the ark was "doomed." Instead of stopping at the upper decks, she continued to dismantle, prying at galvanized nails with a crowbar, slicing through imposing timbers with a chainsaw. At one point, she hoped to at least get a much-reduced ark – little more than a scow – into the water. After two deadline extensions, a judge finally ordered the ark razed. Kea sold the remnants as firewood and scrap.

Weeks before the final June 15 deadline, Kea announced her intention to flee Newark as quickly as possible. She couldn't have known then that it would take her more than a year to do so: a period in which she barricaded herself inside her house and threatened to burn it all down when city officials and the police came to evict her; in which she moved the house from Camden Street to a city-owned lot near the corner of Scott and Mulberry; in which, when the city came for her again, she promised to "lay down some bodies" and was jailed for the threat; and a period in which, eventually, the city tore down her house and finally deprived her of the one thing she'd longed for from the beginning: a home of her own making, a home on her own terms.

Back before all this, though, she also announced – erroneously as it turned out – that when she left Newark, "there will not be a trace of my being there."



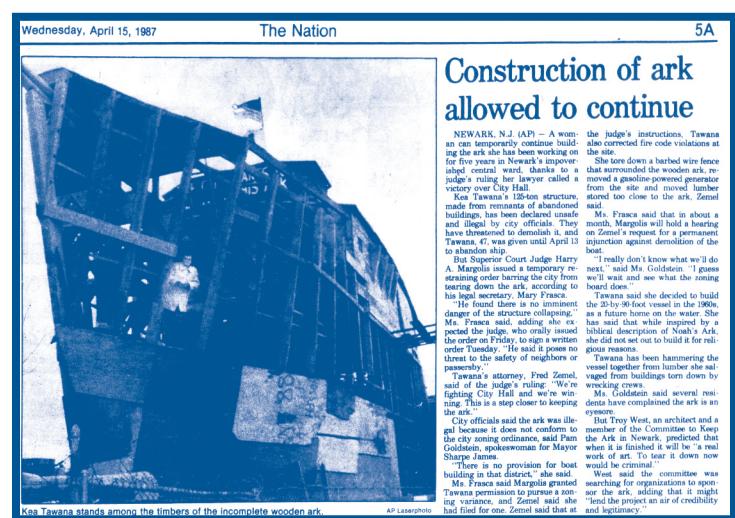
As the battle raged and a county Superior Court judge issued injunctions preventing the ark's immediate destruction, Kea began to embrace the broader, social meanings that had accrued to the ark. No longer just a personal escape vessel, the ark became in her mind the center of a proposed city park with baseball fields and playgrounds. It could serve as a museum and community center. She imagined the ark as a public perch from which one could survey Newark's past (the collected building material), enjoy its present period of seeming rebirth (a new city park), and imagine its future (new courses charted by community members).

Despite Kea's insistence that the ark could be an essential component of the neighborhood's redevelopment rather than its nemesis, her proposed museum of the unwanted and the what-can-be never took root. As new townhouses grew up around the ark, Kea angrily compared the solidity of her building techniques with the "cheap condos" made of "particle board and stapled-on siding." She referred to city officials as "those criminals" who "came after me like vicious dogs" and imagined again escaping to the sea: "I think I would rather deal with Jaws and hurricanes than to deal with our politicians."



KEA AND HER ARK: A TIMELINE

- **1933** the year of Kea's birth, according to a letter she wrote in the early 1990s
- **October 22, 1940** Kea's birthday, according to official ID cards from the early 2000s
- **1952-1953** Kea moves east, spends time in Harlem
- **1954-1957** Kea's first years in Newark
- **1957-1966** Kea moves around the region, including years in Morristown and Brooklyn; works a number of jobs, including construction at the World's Fair in Flushing Meadows
- **1966** Kea moves back to Newark to run the metal shop at Guardian Fence and Construction Co., 463 Clinton Ave, living over the shop
- **1967** Kea moves out of the Clinton Avenue apartment after the riots, to 759 Hunterdon Street. While there, she begins building a house on a truck bed, so that it's mobile
- **1972 or 1973** Kea moves the house to an abandoned lot on Camden Street
- **August 8, 1982** Kea lays the keel to an ark near her house; she will continue to build for more than five years
- **January 1984** An Associated Press story about the ark is run in newspapers around the country
- **May 1986** After New Community Corporation buys the land, Kea moves the now three-story ark twenty-five feet to the parking lot of Humanity Baptist Church
- **July 1986** Kea meets with recently elected Mayor Sharpe James and promises she'll finish or move the ark by the end of the year
- **January 1987** The ark is still there
- **February 1987** The ark is still there
- **March 1987** Inspectors from the municipal Department of Land Use Control cite the ark for numerous violations of living and construction codes
- **Spring 1987** The City of Newark threatens Humanity Baptist's tax-exempt status over the existence of the ark, which it deems a structure being used for non-religious purposes. As a result, the church's pastor declines to seek a zoning variance for the ark
- **Mid-April, 1987** The city intends to begin destruction of the ark around this time
- **April 1, 1987** despite the support of three city council members, a motion to extend the deadline for demolition fails
- **April 10, 1987** Superior Court judge issues a temporary restraining order preventing the city from destroying the ark for at least three weeks, until he can determine its purpose and determine what to do with it
- **May 6, 1987** City Council considers amending zoning codes to prohibit shipbuilding
- **June 1987** Kea's lawyer serves the City of Newark a notice of claims for damages charging she has suffered physical and financial hardships due to their efforts to destroy the ark
- **June 1987** Kea envisions a new city park with the ark at its center
- **July 6, 1987** Newsweek names Kea one of America's "unsung heroes"
- **October 1987** Agreement reached with city whereby Kea given until late March to move the ark. The deadline is eventually extended.
- **March 1988** Kea begins dismantling the ark's upper decks, as a precursor to moving it down to the Passaic River; she asks for, and is granted, an extension of the deadline
- **June 15, 1988** The ark is gone
- **June 16, 1988** In light of the ark's dismantling, a Superior Court judge grants Kea a 30-day extension on the removal of her house from the site
- **October 1988** Kea is still in her house on the site
- **November 1988** Kea is still in her house on the site
- **December 8-9, 1988** Kea holds police and demolition workers at bay by threatening to shoot them and set her house and herself ablaze
- **December 17, 1988** After reaching a deal with the city, Kea's house is towed to a nearby vacant lot
- **December 27, 1988** Kea moves her house again, to Scott Street
- **September 18, 1989** police try to evict Kea, and she is arrested for threatening them
- **1989** Kea moves out of Newark, eventually landing in Port Jervis, NY
- **August 4, 2016** Kea dies at home in Port Jervis



Gallery Aferro and the Clement A. Price Institute on Ethnicity, Culture and the Modern Experience want to extend our sincere gratitude to the many people who have contributed to this project and made it happen. It isn't possible to individually list here the hundreds of people who have come forward, and continue to come forward, with their memories and stories, but we thank you all.

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